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Was invasion decision made without Brezhnev?

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WASHINGTON — Soviet President Leonid I. Brezhnev and Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin, both ill and aging, may not have had a hand in the Kremlin's decision to send thousands of troops into Afghanistan, according to a senior U.S. official.

Acknowledging that intelligence information is sketchy, the official told reporters at the State Department that it was not clear whether there would have been an intervention under the firm rule of Brezhnev, who has been known for efforts at detente with the United States.

The Soviet Union's decision to intervene in Afghanistan, according to some European reports, was taken by Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko, Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov, potential Brezhnev successor Andrei Kirilenko and a handful of others.

The intervention, which President

Analysis

Carter has called the greatest threat to peace since World War II, has plunged U.S.-Soviet relations into sharp decline. Carter has ordered economic and diplomatic reprisals and has halted Senate consideration of the second Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty.

Brezhnev, 73 and in failing health for some time, had trouble hearing and stumbled in public in June at the Vienna summit meeting with Carter. Seldom seen by outsiders over the last several months, Brezhnev was reported officially in December to have a cold.

Kosygin, 75, one of Brezhnev's closest colleagues, was also said to be ill, possibly having suffered a stroke.

Under Brezhnev, the Soviet Union has pursued a policy of detente with the United States, reaching agreements in a number of areas, even amid tensions in others.

Asked about the Afghan intervention, the U.S. official, who asked not to be named, said, "I don't think any of us can say whether this results from a change in the leadership."

However, he added that "it is quite clear, insofar as the leadership is concerned, that both President Brezhnev and Kosygin are not playing the part that they played in the past."